Ref: JC/CA148/RWC2023/General/ Let.17


Mr. Brett Gosper,
CEO, World Rugby & RWCL Managing Director,
World Rugby House,
8-10 Pembroke Street Lower, Dublin 2.

Re: Rugby World Cup 2023 – Host Candidate Evaluation Report
IRFU and Ireland 2023 correspondence to World Rugby Council Members

Dear Brett,

Many thanks for your letter addressed to Dick Spring, Chairman of Ireland 2023 Oversight Board and the IRFU President, Philip Orr referencing the letter to World Rugby council members.

In the interest of expediency, I will reply.

Firstly, let me assure you, and all our friends in World Rugby, that Ireland is fully aware of the terms of the code of conduct applying to the RWC 2023 host selection process. As you, and all your team, will be aware we have adhered at all times to the process in a supportive manner and will continue to do so.

On that note, we would also ask that World Rugby reconfirm the voting process to Council members, so they have full clarity. We consider it critically important that all Council members are reminded that they may vote for any of the three bids and that all bidders have been judged capable of hosting an excellent Rugby World Cup in 2023. Hence a vote for Ireland, rather than a country who scored more points on the system used in the evaluation report, is not a vote against the process, it is in fact in full keeping with the voting process approved by World Rugby Council which states:

"World Rugby Council may vote on all bids but are required to consider the Evaluation Commission (RWCL Board) recommendation"

The Rugby World Cup that we have shared our vision of with the rugby world is to be the greatest sporting event Ireland will ever host and the energies of Ireland, IRFU, Governments and the entire population, together with our powerful diaspora spread throughout the world, remain focused on delivering a truly unique, spectacular and hugely successful tournament for World Rugby.

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Hence, our tenacity at this final stage of a five-year journey to ensure that every detail placed before the World Rugby Council and their Unions, accurately reflects the reality of the situation, as they consider and make their decision to award our flagship tournament.

We accept that the objective of this multi-year evaluation process is the selection of the host for Rugby World Cup 2023 that best meets World Rugby’s objectives. It is important for all in the Rugby family to ensure full confidence is maintained in the process, which has been conducted so professionally to date by Rugby World Cup Limited (RWCL).

Turning specifically to your response to the letters of last week, we note your comments under the various headings and thank you for these.

However, certain aspects have not been addressed and continue to cause concerns for the Ireland 2023 Oversight Board, the IRFU and our Government partners. In the spirit of World Rugby’s three principles by which the process has been guided; fairness, transparency and professionalism, I would ask that you would address the queries below and respond in order to ensure that Council Members have all relevant information available to them in advance of 15 November.

1. Stadia

Firstly, full stadia for all matches is critically important to the success of the tournament as a live event and for broadcast around the world. The capacity mix of match venues and ticketing strategy are crucial factors.

This has been a core consideration in how Ireland has planned its mix of venues in terms of pricing, location and match portfolio.

Whilst certain significant risks were noted in relation to the overall size of match venues in the South African bid, and its ticketing strategy, these do not appear to have been fully reflected in the scoring. There are very clear examples in recent times of starkly empty stadia in South Africa for significant fixtures. Many independent commentators consistently point to the disappointing attendances at South Africa’s home Super Rugby matches. The evaluation report does not appear to address this in any meaningful way.

Query: What specific consideration was given to how South Africa will achieve full stadia, particularly across the pool stage matches involving lower seeded teams?

Query: Why is it that only 4% of overall scoring is attributed to ticketing given its critical importance in delivering a successful RWC? (note: detailed weightings and scoring criteria were only made available to host candidates and World Rugby Council on October 31)

Query: Why have all bidders been scored the same across ticketing despite significant risks being identified with two bids, and these risks appearing to remain despite the mitigation plans offered?

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2. Security

Secondly, on the delicate question of personal security, we have two queries.

We absolutely agree that tournament time security requirements may be different to other periods in a territory, and that the threat level may be influenced by the security proposals implemented. This surely must however be informed by the current underlying threat level within a country at the time of assessment, the recent security history of that country and reasonable expert opinions on the future security of that country.

Query: Was an independently recognised, world class security organisation used to review the underlying security situation within each bidding country – including personal safety as was the case with the 2015 and 2019 evaluation process, and if not, why not?

Query: If such an assessment was undertaken can you please share this assessment?

3. Major event hosting experience

We were surprised to see limited reference to the 2022 Durban Commonwealth Games situation, given the Commonwealth Games Federation was forced to strip South Africa of the hosting rights for the 2022 games and issue the following statement:

'It is with disappointment that the detailed review has concluded that there is a significant departure from the undertakings provided in Durban’s bid and as a result a number of key obligations and commitments in areas such as governance, venues, funding and risk management/assurance have not been met under the revised proposition.'

We would expect even a brief private discussion between World Rugby, or any of the World Rugby Council members, and representatives of the Commonwealth Games Federation to reveal great disquiet about the reputational damage done to the Commonwealth Games and its stakeholders by this episode. We would ask that World Rugby and its Council members fully consider this in the context of awarding the RWC 2023 hosting rights, our flagship event.

Query: Did RWCL carry out a full due diligence as to why the hosting rights for the Commonwealth games in 2022 were taken from South Africa?

Query: Did RWCL discuss this with Commonwealth Games Federation in a substantive manner?

Query: Was this raised directly with the South African Government and at what level?

4. Financial, commercial and commitments

We are concerned regarding the evaluation of financial commitments and guarantees, given South Africa’s current sovereign credit rating as categorised by Standard & Poor’s, is BB+, which is defined as speculative grade (sometimes referred to as ‘junk’).

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For the RWC 2015 and 2019 bid evaluation process, World Rugby appointed an experienced external organisation (Barclays) to conduct an independent sovereign risk assessment related to guarantees, and each of the guarantors, provided by each bid. This appears reasonable as part of any risk based evaluation, particularly given the importance of these financial guarantees to the funding of World Rugby and the global game.

Query: Can RWCL confirm whether a similar rigorous assessment has been conducted for the 2023 process on each bid and if so can you please share this assessment?

We consider that the mechanical nature of the technical review undertaken by RWCL does not properly capture these clearly material issues which we raise and as a result, in our opinion, Ireland’s scoring has suffered unreasonably, relative to the scoring for other bidders.

We ask for your assurance that RWCL will fully address the matters noted above with the World Rugby Council, who ultimately must take responsibility for the decision to award the hosting rights, and remind them again that all three bidders have proven themselves capable of hosting and are therefore legitimate recipients of their votes to host.

We plan to share a more extensive list of queries with the evaluation report to seek clarification from RWCL before close of business tomorrow, November 7th.

Bidding for Rugby World Cup 2023 on behalf of Ireland has been a wonderfully challenging, exciting and rewarding process. We have worked incredibly hard and in a very positive manner with the staff of RWCL for almost 3 years to enable us all to have great confidence in Ireland’s ability to deliver a fantastic Rugby World Cup in 2023. I want to assure you that the IRFU look forward to continuing to play our role in a positive and respectful manner up until voting day on November 15. We believe that this is our duty to the people of Ireland and indeed to the evaluation process and tournament and, most importantly, for rugby throughout the world.

We look forward to your responses to the queries above.

With kind regards.

Yours in Rugby,

PHILIP BROWNE
Chief Executive

c.c. World Rugby Council Members